

## Governor abandons split-state proposal Schweitzer sought zone around park to protect brucellosis-free status

By SCOTT McMILLION Chronicle Staff Writer

Gov. Brian Schweitzer is giving up on the idea of a "split-state" status for brucellosis control in Montana.

"I'm done," he said Saturday in an interview at the Bobcat-Grizzly football game.

For the past two years, Schweitzer has sought to establish a special buffer or other administrative zone around Yellowstone National Park. Earlier this year, federal disease control officials said the idea was feasible and Schweitzer asked the Montana Board of Livestock to take the idea to the state's ranchers.

By setting up a split-state status, if another cattle herd comes up with brucellosis, only the ranchers inside the greater Yellowstone area would be forced to undergo expensive testing before exporting cattle. The rest of the state would keep its brucellosis-free status, which the state has enjoyed since 1985.

The disease was discovered in a herd in Bridger in May. If a second case is uncovered within two years, the entire state loses its brucellosis free status.

With a split-state status, Schweitzer said, 95 percent of the state's ranchers would be protected.

The idea didn't impress some ranchers, particularly members of the Montana Stockgrowers Association, which fought the proposal, maintaining it would be impractical, expensive and divisive in the industry.

Errol Rice, executive secretary of the Stockgrowers, said Saturday that he is pleased the governor decided to drop the idea.

If more brucellosis is detected, Rice said, completing the paperwork necessary for split-state status would take nearly as long as it would for the entire state to regain disease-free status. Plus, having a special zone would be a disincentive for addressing brucellosis in wildlife and "long term, we don't feel like that bodes well for the livestock industry in Montana," he said.

Stockgrowers organized opposition to the idea while the Montana Cattlemen's Association urged pursuing it.

Schweitzer said Saturday the split-status idea needed consensus among ranch groups if it was to work and the Stockgrowers scuttled that effort.

"We threw them a life rope," Schweitzer said. "They said 'We don't want any life ropes.' That's what their position is."

Rice said he didn't see the proposal as a "lifeline" at all. Rather, he said, he saw it as "a step backwards."

The state's producers of breeding cattle will suffer the worst if more brucellosis is found, he said. Those ranchers sell live breeding animals, semen and embryos around the nation and the world.

Schweitzer said one breeder recently told him he'd discovered a market in Russia for 10,000 purebred Angus heifers, but that market will evaporate if the entire state loses its disease-free status.

"It's not a question of if, but when" another case of the disease is discovered, Schweitzer said. "We knew this was not going to be the easy route, but we were looking for a way to be proactive."

Brucellosis has been largely eradicated from the nation, but a large reservoir of it persists in the bison and elk of Yellowstone.

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